
**HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD
STAFF REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION**

Landmark/District:	Riggs National Bank	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Agenda
Address:	1503 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW	<input type="checkbox"/> Consent Calendar
Meeting Date:	June 25, 2015	<input type="checkbox"/> Demolition
H.P.A. Number:	15-374	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Alteration
Date Received:	4/28/15	<input type="checkbox"/> Subdivision
Staff Reviewer:	David Maloney	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Conceptual Design

The Milken Family Foundation and Shalom Baranes Associates, Architects, have requested review of the design concept for an addition to the former Riggs National Bank building opposite the U.S. Treasury on Pennsylvania Avenue, NW. The building is a designated historic landmark in the DC Inventory of Historic Sites, as well as a contributing structure within the Fifteenth Street Financial Historic District and the Lafayette Square National Historic Landmark District.

Riggs National Bank

The Riggs National Bank building is often cited as the most significant private banking structure in Washington. It occupies the city's premier banking location, formerly the site of the Second Bank of the United States, directly across from the main door to the Treasury Department. For more than 150 years, it was the city's pre-eminent bank, intimately involved in the financial affairs of noted individuals and the federal government. The monumental granite headquarters building from 1899-1902, designed by Manhattan architects York and Sawyer, forms the centerpiece of the city's most recognizable banking corner, flanked by the 1904-05 American Security & Trust Company (also by York and Sawyer, and now the Bank of America), and the 1924 Riggs addition by Appleton P. Clark, the city's most prolific bank architect. The backdrop for the low-rise composition is the 1930 high-rise American Security & Trust addition from 1930.¹

The Riggs Bank design greatly influenced subsequent bank construction in Washington, as described in the multiple property documentation adopted by the Board and the National Register of Historic Places. Excerpts from that form and the bank's National Register nomination are attached for further information.

Project Concept

The Milken Family Foundation proposes to occupy the Riggs building for offices, conference facilities, and a Museum of the American Educator. The museum would occupy the original banking hall, with exhibit space accessible to the public. Exterior alterations include an accessible entrance, relocation of visible rooftop mechanical equipment, expansion of the existing 5th floor, and construction of a new 6th floor. The proposed interior renovations include the reintroduction of natural lighting in the banking hall.

¹ York and Sawyer's other work in Washington includes Saint Alban's School (1905) and the Department of Commerce (1927-32).

The original project concept showed a larger proposal for additional floors that would have spanned the entire roof, precluding the opportunity to reintroduce natural light into the banking hall. The applicant deserves credit for reworking the proposal in consultation with the Historic Preservation Office and Commission of Fine Arts staff.

As developed, the proposed building additions are configured to relate to the adjacent roofscapes and provide an opening for natural light to filter down to the banking hall. The fifth floor would expand into the present attic area behind the existing parapets, and would not change the building appearance from the street. The new sixth floor would be visible above the parapets, with facades of glass and copper panels, partially screened by copper screening. The choice of material was intended to help the addition blend with the copper roofs on adjacent buildings.

Evaluation

The applicant's proposal offers various preservation benefits including universal access to the banking hall, and the relocation of unsightly rooftop mechanical equipment away from public visibility. The program of uses also offers a suitable opportunity to continue public access to the historic landmark's main interior space.

On the other hand, the Board's design guidelines discourage visible roof additions. The guidelines for additions state: "Any roof-top addition should be located far enough behind the existing cornice so that it is hidden from view by pedestrians on the street. If this is not possible, the design of the addition or its screening should be compatible with the character of the building." Because of the significance of this historic landmark, it is probably fair to say that the only justification for pursuing a visible roof addition is the difficulty associated with maintaining the central skylight area open to the sky.

Interior Restoration

The most significant preservation benefit proposed is the reintroduction of natural daylight into the banking hall. A newspaper account at the time of the completion of the "Model Bank Building" referred to an "immense ceiling light" that illuminated the hall, along with the single large front and rear windows. This skylight, measuring 25 by 60 feet and 53 feet above the floor, was essential because of the bank's side walls closed in by a mid-block location. Closing off most of the animating daylight in this soaring space had the unfortunate effect of leaving it somewhat dull and lifeless. The interior is not protected as a specifically designated part of the historic landmark, but it largely retains its impressive architectural character despite some modifications.

Roof Addition

In contrast to the restoration of natural light, which helps to restore the character of the historic landmark consistent with the stated purposes of the Historic Protection Act, the rooftop addition is a mixed blessing. It helps to remove the unsightly accretion of mechanical equipment and to adapt the landmark for current use, but the architectural treatment of the additional sixth floor needs refinement to make it compatible with the character of the landmark and historic district.

The architectural approach to the rooftop composition, illustrated in the concept diagram on page 15 of the submission, is a sound one: to develop the design in a manner related to the existing copper-clad roofs on the adjacent buildings, using similar materials. The original Riggs roof, though not visible from the street, has the same character (see for example the photo on page 30,

showing the sloping roof at lower right covered in what appears to be copper and glazing panels). However, there are two significant differences between the current proposal and the other context examples. The proposed Riggs addition is entirely rectilinear in composition, rather than sloped like the other hipped and mansard roofs in proximity. It also includes a projecting central glass pavilion that draws the eye toward it, unlike the other examples, which are simply expressed unitary forms unbroken by such a focal element.

The end result of these differences is that the roof addition tends to become a prominent focus of the entire multi-building composition, drawing the eye away from the iconic Riggs portico as the major focus. The rooftop pavilion is highlighted by its glass façade, and is taller than required programmatically (see the rendering on page 16 showing human scale), due to its drawing the height of the central atrium skylight forward to be expressed on the façade.

Several approaches to modifying the current design could be used to address this concern:

- The atrium roof, the tallest structure, could be expressed separately as a distinct compositional element surrounded by a lower form, as it is on the adjacent American Security roof as well the original Riggs roof (see pages 16, 22, 31, and 32). This could allow the office space surrounding the atrium to be expressed as lower, secondary elements, rather than a primary mass elevated in apparent height (see the 6th floor wall section on page 22).
- The forward projection for a central roof pavilion could be reduced or eliminated.
- Sloping forms could be integrated into the composition, relating to the roof vocabulary.
- Skylighting or clerestory lighting in perimeter offices could be used to reduce the amount of glazing needed on the perimeter walls. This could also help control the nighttime effect of a glowing glass box hovering behind copper screens above the historic façade.
- Cladding the topmost part of the addition, at least on the original Riggs building, in opaque copper panels could reinforce its expression as an attic story. This might also distinguish it from the additional floor above the less sensitive 1924 addition.
- Slightly recessing the addition or perhaps raising a section of parapet along the east party wall could help reduce the expression of the addition as a full floor rather than an attic (see page 13).

Façade Alteration

The only alteration proposed to the historic façades is to convert the existing front window in the 1924 addition to an accessible entrance. This avoids alteration of the main entrance. HPO concurs with the Commission of Fine Arts recommendation that the existing stone frame with the scrolled brackets should be retained. The design for the new door should also be developed further.

Evaluation and Recommendations

The staff recommends that the Board encourage the applicant to refine the project design in accordance with the above comments.